

Waking up to Turkish aggression – A news review

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by Sarah Glynn

This week, an [Italian opinion poll](#) found that 14% of respondents thought that Turkey was the country that posed the biggest threat to the world. It was an odd question, but the response does suggest that most people are more aware of the dangers posed by an aggressive imperialist Turkey than many politicians appear to be.

Italian perceptions may be heightened by Turkey's actions in the Eastern Mediterranean and Artsakh/Nagorno Karabakh, but the dangers of the Turkish regime continue to increase in Syria, in Iraq and in Turkey itself.

In Turkey

As underlined by Tuesday's strong judgement against Turkey in the European Court of Human Rights, the nature of the Turkish regime is publicly documented; however, this doesn't translate into international action. The court ordered the immediate release of former People's Democratic Party (HDP) co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş, recognising his four-year pre-trial detention as anti-democratic and driven by political motives. But Turkey will not cooperate with this order, and there is no appetite among European leaders to apply any pressure.

Meanwhile, Leyla Guven, co-chair of the Democratic Society Congress (DTK), and fearless campaigner for rights, freedoms and democracy, has been sentenced to 22 years, and arrested yet again; political prisoners are now four weeks into their rotating hunger strike against prison conditions and the isolation of Abdullah Ocalan; round-ups of other politicians and activists continue; and a bill about to be debated in the Turkish parliament would allow the authorities, without need for a court order, to replace an NGO's executives, seize their documents, and stop their activity.

As sociologist Rosa Burç observed on Twitter (21 December): "Those who follow Turkish politics will have noticed this new language among commentators of 'resuming peace talks' and 'political reforms', creating the illusion Turkey might be changing policies domestically... I wonder with whom are they going to talk about peace if they lock up all key figures behind bars?"

The comprehensive nature of Turkey's crackdown is demonstrated by lawsuits brought against Turkish citizens for insulting the president. From President Erdoğan's installation up until the end of 2019, 27,717 lawsuits were filed, including 264 against children between 12 and 14.

In Iraq

While protests in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (South Kurdistan) have faded into last week's news, the problems have not gone away – and, as a paper by South Kurdistan intellectuals observes, these cannot be understood without

looking at the impact of Turkey's military operations and territorial occupation on the region's social, economic and political situation.

Kurdish news-watchers have seen a series of portraits of young men appear on their screens. Very young men, who should have had their whole lives ahead of them, but who saw only poverty and unemployment. They went out into the streets to claim a future, but all they found was a shroud, after security forces responded to protestors with live ammunition. Hundreds more people were arrested, including journalists, and the main non-government television station has faced raids and closures.

As with so many oil-rich areas, South Kurdistan has suffered from the curse of black gold – not only in war, but also in corruption, and in an economy almost totally dependent on this one volatile industry. There has been little attempt to develop other sources of income, and a large part of the population relies on government jobs. This gave them a small stake in the system, but delays and cuts in public sector salaries, together with failing services, have destroyed even this grossly-unfair social contract.

The immediate cause of the anti-government protests was the unpaid salaries of the region's extensive public sector, but those on the streets were venting their frustration at years of corrupt and incompetent government run by a small feudal elite, dominated by the Barzani family.

Rather than address these problems, the government has attempted to suppress the protests, so increasing public anger. Offices of both main government parties – the Barzani family's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – have been torched, but so have offices of other parties in a show of political frustration. So far, protests have lacked coherent leadership and strategy, but problems are only growing, and there is space for new movements to emerge – if not now, then in the near future.

The immediate cause of the unpaid salaries has been a long-running budget dispute between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi federal government. But this is part of a bigger dispute about the region's

independence. To counter the power of Bagdad, the KDP has made agreements with Turkey. A 50-year deal, made without the knowledge of the KDP's coalition partners, has given Turkey huge control over the region's oil, and severely limited the KRG's room for manoeuvre.

And the KDP is being increasingly drawn into Turkey's decades-old war against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) guerrillas, who were already entrenched in the South Kurdistan mountains long before the establishment of the autonomous Kurdistan region. Turkey's increasing takeover of parts of South Kurdistan has left hundreds of villages depopulated and, in the last five years, has caused the death of 99 villagers. This has had a major impact on the region's economy too.

Governments facing dissatisfied populations try and redirect their anger at stigmatised others. For Turkey, the Kurds have always served this function. The KDP has tried to build up anger against the PKK, even attempting to suggest that it, rather than people's unmet frustrations, was responsible for the riotous turn of the demonstrations. The KDP's peşmerga have instigated clashes with the PKK and People's Protection Units (YPG), and tried to blame them not only for these, but also for the casualties caused by Turkish attacks. However, outside KDP ranks, people recognise the danger of encouraging an intra-Kurdish civil war from which only Turkey would be the winner.

Despite all this, the so-called 'international community' still regards the KRG as people to do business with. Although there has been criticism of their crackdown on the protestors, it has been muted by that false pretence at 'balance' between lethal state violence and popular riot that has become a hallmark of current politics.

In Syria

Tentative hopes for a better international climate have been pinned on US President elect Joe Biden, but there are still four weeks until Biden takes over, leading to fears that Turkey will try and act in the interregnum. Many of these fears focus on North East Syria, and especially the area around Ain Issa, which commands the main M4 road east of Kobanê. Turkey has never kept to the

ceasefire negotiated by Russia, but this month, breaches have escalated, leading to fears that this is the prelude to an all-out attack. The Rojava Information Centre (RIC) recorded on Sunday that 9,600 people have fled, eight have been killed and 38 wounded.

When Turkey invaded Afrîn, Russia tried to persuade the YPG to hand the region to the Syrian regime, and they are clearly pursuing a similar strategy today, despite being the notional guarantors of the ceasefire. Local people protest in front of Russia's military bases, but it is not in Russia's interests to intervene. And, despite ever mounting evidence of the horrific reality of life under the jihadi gangs that control Turkish-occupied areas, the rest of the world remains focused on Covid-19 and Christmas.

This is not a call for more imperialist intervention, but as the PYD's Saleh Muslim repeatedly explains, a no-fly zone over NE Syria would allow the people of the Autonomous Area to defend themselves.

Perhaps nothing better demonstrates the risks of this international abdication of responsibility than the situation of the thousands of ISIS prisoners and their families in camps run by the beleaguered Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES). RIC has recently issued a report on the actions being taken by the Administration, which was launched at a highly informative meeting hosted by Royal Roads University in Canada.

We heard about widespread reaction against the realities of ISIS among the foreign recruits, and about work being done by the Administration to resurrect social values and enable people to reintegrate into society. But we also heard how hardcore ISIS ideologues are able to police the camps and brutally punish any backsliders among their fellow prisoners, and how a chronic lack of resources means that the Administration's programmes can only touch a fraction of those affected, so that a new ISIS generation is still being reared within the camps.

The Administration has long asked for international help through both practical assistance and international justice, but governments that claim to regard ISIS as an existential enemy, want nothing to do with their ISIS

nationals, and are hesitant to do anything that could be interpreted as giving recognition to the Autonomous Administration.

There will be a lot of words said this week about peace and goodwill to mankind. Kurdistan would be a good place to start putting this into practice.